

IS THEOLOGY CHANGING

in the conservative camp?

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"They chose new gods; then was war in the gates"

In the March 1956 issue of the magazine **Christian Life** there appeared an article under the title, "Is Evangelical Theology Changing?" The article purported to have been based on replies to a questionnaire sent out to a number of Christian leaders in this country. The general conclusion of the editors was that the theology in question was indeed changing, and definitely for the better; that the older fundamentalism was giving place to a new evangelicism.

As to this particular type of journalism, it may be said that one of its weaknesses is that the reader is given only selected portions—often very brief—from the replies to the questionnaire, and therefore has no opportunity to study them in their original context. Certainly, in this case, some of the editorial conclusions may be not unfairly characterized as highly dubious. I cannot feel that all the participants would fully subscribe to all of them—a reservation which is acknowledged in an editorial note (p. 19).

From the article in question I have selected six points for comment.

1. The editors begin with a blunt affirmation that, in the case of historic fundamentalism, what started out "as a high level theological discussion degenerated into a cat and dog fight." Now it is true that there have been plenty of such fights in the ranks of the Fundamentalists, and also, for that matter, among the Modernists. But the central contro-

versy of fundamentalism has never been a mere cat and dog fight. Even its more intelligent opponents have been able to see that clearly. Do the editors of Christian Life think that the great fundamental truths of Christianity are no longer under serious attack and that Fundamentalists in general are no longer concerned about these weighty matters? If so, they do not know enough about current history to render a judgment of much value.

2. The editors of Christian Life seem to be highly allergic to the name "Fundamentalist." In this I can sympathize with them to some extent, having gone through that phase in my own younger days. But I found that nothing much can be done about labels, except to insist upon proper definitions and safeguards against misinterpretations. Even the name "Christian" was probably a term of contempt in the beginning. But it was not therefore repudiated by the early church. And "democracy" is still an honorable word in spite of its appropriation by dishonorable men. As for the use of the word "Fundamentalists" in connection with a certain polygamous sect of Mormonism, the editors of Christian Life along with practically all the other news reporters in the United States have missed the point completely. These particular Mormons were called "Fundamentalists" because they refused to give up the original and fundamental beliefs of their religion, one of which was polygamy. Such a

use of the term, properly understood, should have been regarded as a compliment to the fundamentalist movement in the Protestant churches. But you cannot expect that ordinary newspaper reporters will see things like that. The semantic confusion of names with things is hardly a mark of intellectual clarity.

Dr. Billy Graham, who is cited by Christian Life as being antipathetic toward the name "Fundamentalist," would have been better advised (if he was advised) to have accepted it and then to have defined carefully its true and historical meaning. This could not possibly have reduced his stature; but it would have saved from distress and perplexity thousands of his devoted supporters who have (rightly or wrongly) identified the cause of evangelical Christianity with the fundamentalist movement.

As to the "guilt by association" which is always a possible danger to be faced in the use of any religious label, one might as well suffer classification with a few crackpots who may call themselves "Fundamentalists" (and with no greater embarrassment) as to be put with the heterogeneous brood which at one time or another have found shelter beneath the broad umbrella of "evangelicalism." For that matter, no unhappy label can ever make a good product bad; nor by the same token can the most carefully phrased label make a bad product good.

3. The editors of Christian Life have listed a number of things with reference to which the new "evangelicalism" is regarded as more ex-

cellent than "fundamentalism." But some of these things are not new at all. Do the editors actually suppose that historic fundamentalism has had no "positive witness for God's redemptive love, wisdom and power as revealed in Jesus Christ"? Do they think that its scholarly leaders had no good word for the labors and contributions of science? Do they mean to say that there was no recognition of the reality of Biblical healing for the body of the Christian? If so, they should go back and read more carefully the serious literature of the movement.

4. On the other hand, some of the alleged trends of the new "evangelicalism" are definitely unhealthy. For one thing, there seems to be a mortal fear of being **against** things that are wrong, lest we be charged with a lack of "constructive" thought and action. But considered rationally, there is always a destructive side to action which is constructive. It may be necessary to clear away the debris before we can build the new structure. And once constructed, we may find it an important thing to fight the arsonists who never care what they burn down. The Fundamentalists of the past were intensely against some things for the very simple reason that they were irrevocably **for** some things. Never in all their careers did men like Moody, Torrey, Biederwolf and Sunday hesitate to speak publicly and emphatically against the detractors of Christianity, and to call them by name no matter who they were. They were unwilling to sacrifice fundamental issues for the sake of a short-term gain. Going back somewhat further in history, we find the Reformers not afraid to label the Papal system as the anti-Christian "harlot" of Biblical prophecy. But today we read over his own signature the declaration of one popular evangelist that he is determined never to say anything **against** the Roman Catholic organization. Whether such an attitude is a mark of true progress or not will ultimately be demonstrated by history. But if the Word of God is reliable, the final verdict is not in doubt. The church has a definite twofold responsibility before God: first, we must preach the Word; and second,



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we must also reprove and rebuke all that is false (I Tim. 4:1-4).

5. The editors of Christian Life think the new "evangelicalism" will be more willing to "converse with liberal theologians." As for myself, I have never been unwilling to talk with unbelievers. But through some 40 years of experience I have found it easier to talk with materialists, agnostics, and even atheists than with a group of men who while professing to be Christians are engaged (often surreptitiously) in trying to destroy the very foundations of the Christian faith. Does Dr. Vernon Grounds (who is quoted on this point) really think that we might "profitably engage in an exchange of ideas" with blasphemers who suggest that our only Lord and Master was begotten in the womb of a fallen mother by a German mercenary and that the God of the Old Testament is a dirty bully? Basically, the problem here is ethical rather than theological, as President Culbertson of Moody Bible Institute has so clearly pointed out. As history plainly teaches, hobnobbing too closely with the enemy has always cost the cause of Christianity much more than it ever gained. I understand the desirability of an acquaintance with the program and ideas of our opponents, but we must never for one instant forget that they are deadly enemies with whom there can be neither truce nor compromise. You do not find the Apostle Paul suggesting an "exchange of ideas" with Hymenaeus and Alexander; but on the contrary they were delivered to Satan in order that they might "learn not to blaspheme" (I Tim. 1:20). Modern blasphemy is no less reprehensible than it was in ancient days.

It is both curious and disturbing

today to find "evangelicals" who, while bewailing the belligerence of historic fundamentalism and advocating a closer rapprochement with the modern liberals, at the same time spend so much effort and time belaboring and fighting against their own side. It looks sometimes as if they might have gotten lost in the dust of the real battle for the faith.

6. The major change to be brought about by the new "evangelicalism," according to the Christian Life editors, is a shift from contending for the faith to insistence upon the necessity of the new birth. This is undoubtedly the worst thing about the entire editorial. In the first place, its implications are false. Do the editors actually suppose that among the leaders of fundamentalism, historically and today, there is no proper insistence on the need of being born again? If so, they are not competent to deal with their subject. On this point, it is only necessary to compare the literature of historic fundamentalism with that of the new "evangelicalism" to find the comparative place given to the divine command: "Ye must be born again." But, secondly, the leaders of fundamentalism were not wrong in giving first place to matters of Christian "faith." For they understood clearly that the new birth is not something which can be produced in a vacuum; and that without certain factors such an experience is totally impossible. They knew, as the late Dr. Machen asserted so effectively, that the new birth is a result, not a cause. Therefore, if the editors of Christian Life should prove to be correct in their estimate of present trends away from objective matters of Christian faith toward matters of subjective experience, the day may come when there will be no more new births.

Finally, the editors of Christian Life express deep concern over the divisions which have blunted the effectiveness of fundamentalism. With them, I sincerely share this concern. But a reading of their expressed views will only deepen the conviction of many that they are abetting a trend which may not only lead to another division, but one which will be the deepest and most disastrous of all.